

[By Bob Kinzel](#)

(Host) There's some very good financial news for Vermont and its efforts to repair roads and bridges damaged by tropical storm Irene.

Congressional negotiators have agreed to lift a federal cap on transportation repair costs.

And, as VPRs Bob Kinzel reports, this waiver could save the state more than \$150 million.

(Kinzel) The agreement lifts a \$100 million cap on federal highway disaster relief aid. It means that Vermont's share of repair costs to state roads and bridges will be roughly \$40 million. Without the waiver, the state was looking at almost \$200 million in repair expenses.

The agreement also allows the state to spend the federal money over a longer period of time.

Governor Peter Shumlin says the agreement is very good news for the state.

(Shumlin)"It's the news that we've been waiting for. ... It's just huge news for us. It allows us to really rebuild our roads and bridges the way they should be rebuilt without skimping and saving and doing it right."

And Shumlin says this news totally changes the dynamics of the 2012 legislative session because the state won't have to decimate its own transportation budget to pay for these repairs:

(Shumlin)"We were going to have to make some really draconian choices about money. We're already in tough fiscal times but this would have been the icing on the cake that made our

financial challenges extraordinarily miserable."

Senator Patrick Leahy led the effort in the Senate to lift the cap. Leahy says he was successful because he stressed a sense of fairness with his colleagues.

(Leahy)"I said we're a little state. We're going to be devastated if we didn't get this emergency money. We've done it for other states in the past. Vermont has never complained about other states being helped but we need help now."

The major battle to lift the cap came in the U.S. House because Republican leaders were insisting that any extra money allocated for highway disaster relief be offset by additional budget cuts.

Congressman Peter Welch was the founder of bi-partisan coalition of House members from states that were hit hard by Irene. He thinks this coalition played a key role in this debate:

(Welch) "That was Republicans and Democrats and we created a space where all of us who were representing folks that were in the path of the destruction of Irene were working together. And I think it created a real sense among the Republican leadership that, 'Hey, this is about folks getting hurt, it's about Americans. This is not going to be used by either side to try to get a partisan advantage.' So that was really helpful."

Both the House and Senate are scheduled to formally vote on the legislation by the end of the week.